My experience as a reader and a future educator has greatly broadened from reading the page one extract from Russell Hoban’s novel *Riddley Walker*. This excerpt challenged the usual strategies I employ when reading and made me think about why I was challenged. In addition, the unconventional grammatical structure inspired me to develop exciting and unique strategies I could use in the future to help students. Lastly, I had never understood the imperative connections between language and education and the effects the methods of teaching language have on students. This reflective discussion helps to explain how I have broadened and changed my understanding of language.

When I started reading *Riddley Walker* I noticed I automatically employed my usual strategies to decode the text which included becoming a code breaker, text participant, text user and text analyst. My initial judgement was that many words were misspelled, the grammar was ‘incorrect’ and some words did not exist in standard English. I realised I was looking at this text from a standard English perspective, and had not considered that this passage was structurally correct in the context Hoban had created. This context was a post apocalyptic environment where the inhabitants had developed language from fragmented means and unknown sources. This lead to me to have a deeper understanding that variation in the way language is written and spoken does not necessarily mean someone using a different dialect or non standard variation is wrong; they merely use a different set of rules. In addition, I will ensure my future students will be educated about the difference between structural error and inappropriate usage and I will not use the word ‘wrong’ when describing their writing.

To help gain meaning of the text I revisited the literary background of the text which revealed Hoban’s character Walker, lived in a society two thousand years after a nuclear war where most people were illiterate and Walker described himself as barely literate. In a literate society, the functions of language are shared out between speaking and writing. Looking at this text from a descriptive view, Walker’s writing structure exhibits characteristics common to both written and spoken language. An example of a characteristic of spoken language includes Walker using first person references. This may indicate Walker’s lack of knowledge of how to write using the third person and how to detach meaning from immediate personal experience. As reading and writing are not biological functions these differences must be taught and learners must be exposed to many models. This made me question how Walker could learn these traits when he may never be exposed to any models. Another example of Walker using characteristics of spoken language includes Walker referring to his mental process in the text. For example, ‘The woal thing fealt jus that little bit stupid’ and ‘I took noatis of that leadertho’ . Walker also uses direct quotes such as ‘I said, ‘Your tern now my tern later’ which are typical characteristics of speech and the speaker’s involvement with the audience. Walkers’ minimal instruction on how to exploit the different features of the language system are evident in this excerpt and have highlighted my role as an educator to explicitly demonstrate the differences between written and spoken language so the students can confidently use these functions in correct context.

Reading text which is not readily or automatically recognised can create confusion and frustration for any reader. The unconventional use of grammatical structure or non-standard English can present challenges. Skimming over the text to gain a basic understanding of the context helped me to understand the register in which Holban had written, and provided a framework for potential decoding strategies. Using graphological and phonological information, I made predictions about the words. I used semantic information to gain meaning and grammatical information to make sense of the structure of the text. I could not decode the word ‘farness’. I kept trying to use sound-letter correspondence and in my head I could only see the word ‘fairness’ which could grammatically fit into the sentence. After revisiting all of my strategies I eventually broke the word into far=distant and the suffix –ness = the state of being. Although this word is not typically standard English, I was still able to successfully decode it’s meaning from Walker’s dialect. I felt elated and proud that I was able eventually use my skills. Unfortunately I was unable to decode the word ‘girzel’. I assumed it could mean ‘drizzle’ in standard English or it could represent something different. I felt frustrated that I could not decode this word, however it did not affect my overall understanding of the sentence. The essential requirement for me was a willingness to compromise known rules and truths about linguistics and have the willingness to take risks. This is something I will teach my students; as long as people are aware of the differences and uses of language, language should resemble exploration without fear. The awareness of my own reading skills did to a small extent affect the enjoyment of this text. I found myself feeling satisfied that I had the ‘power’ to decode a non standard English text. While these procedures took time, I believe I was no better, faster, worse or slower than other people who have a basic understanding of linguistics. I found decoding unknown words interesting and may use this technique in the future to demonstrate how the study of dialects can become a vibrant, relevant topic for all learners on a formal and informal level.

Reading this text developed my awareness that knowledge of language can affect the experience of early readers in many ways. I believe the strategies I used to assist me to interpret the text have heightened my awareness of possible responses children might experience when reading. These responses include frustration, satisfaction, helplessness, enjoyment and the feeling of being overwhelmed. Unfortunately some of these responses produce negative emotional responses from developing readers which may cause some readers to deem reading is not worth the effort. Should the subject matter or text not resonate with the individual, I imagine some readers may not persist. In addition some teachers may provide negative feedback by mistaking structural errors and inappropriate usage which may deflate the enthusiasm of individuals. Lastly, I have learned that children need to become aware through explicit teaching and modelling the wide range of varieties and functions of language.